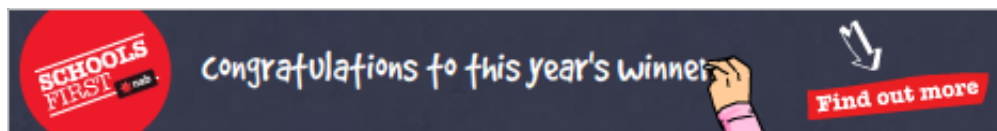




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Generations torn apart by indifference

Roger Stitson

February 19, 2007



The removal of Aboriginal children from their homes is an enduring tragedy.

IN HER non-fiction book *Searching for the Secret River*, discussing the background to how she came to write the novel *The Secret River*, Kate Grenville muses over a dispatch sent to England by Governor Arthur Phillip, in which he refers to an altercation with an old Aboriginal man soon after Britain's colonisation of the Great South Land in 1788. Grenville remarks, "I could hear Phillip's voice, but I couldn't hear the old man's. I had a feeling he might have told the story differently."

This "alternative" history, the voice, the memory, the opinion, the knowledge of the dispossessed and the reviled, the defeated, the ignored and the forgotten, forms an essential theme that permeates Larissa Behrendt's semi-autobiographical and history-based novel *Home*, about three generations of a family, from 1918 to 1995, ripped apart by state and federal government policies and indifference, predating what has since come to be known as the enduring tragedy of the stolen generation.

The angriest expression in *Home* of the gulf between the recorded, official or establishment view of historical events and the despair of those who are powerless to voice their own version of events, even decades later, relates to an early 1880s massacre of Eualeyai tribal people near the NSW town of Walgett.

When the novel begins, in 1995, a young land-rights and native-title lawyer from Sydney, Candice Brecht, daughter of an Anglo mother, accompanies her father to Walgett partly with a view to discover more for herself about his family heritage. At the post office she comes across a slender volume about the town history written by the local historical society's president, "a Mrs Cynthia Kerrigan-Mullins", who expresses the following in a chapter titled *Humble But Strong Beginnings*: "Being troubled by the blacks and living in fear of them, a party was got together who surrounded about 300 Aborigines at the creek and shot down most of them, including men, women and piccaninnies."

The name of the author of these careless, unfeeling and callously phrased words has been chosen deliberately by Behrendt to create an impression of a form of arrogant, self-centred British-Australian aristocracy, of graceless rural social-climbing away from one's coarse yet romanticised roots, from which you could draw a pen-portrait caricature. Her version of history - although it is doubtful she would realise it is merely one of a variety of "truths" - is a succession of Anglo achievements won in extreme adversity over the local

environment and its primitive inhabitants, beginning, of course, with the heroic construction of her great-grandfather's general store. Here those pesky blacks have been expunged from the story.

The Eualeyai folk memory, though, of being rounded up and shot "like cattle, about 400", is different from what is written. More than a century later the story is still passed down through the generations: "Dad said that as a kid he had seen the skeletons, bones and teeth, all sizes, like they were just waiting to be found . . . And he could see the lead musket balls in the trunk." Furthermore, in 1995 "Granny", the eldest member of Candice's Aboriginal family (but not Candice's real grandmother) "and the last to speak the old language fluently", refuses to set foot anywhere near the killings, a place hypocritically renamed by the victors in the 1880s as "Temperance Creek", suggesting the perpetrators' repressed Christian guilt overlaid by a wilful amnesia of their misdeeds.

Although not causally connected directly, reference to this brutal action is twice juxtaposed, both early and towards the end of *Home*, with the stealing of 14-year-old Garibooli, Candice's grandmother, by two white policemen, linking the two events not only by a suppression of truth amounting to a great lie, but by the institutionalised, legitimised Anglo-Australian power base extending down from the law-making parliaments of the land to those authorities charged with putting those laws into effect at local level. For when Candice's father, Bob, tracks down the official documents nearly 70 years later, he finds that Garibooli, or "Elizabeth" (having peremptorily been given that English name at birth "by the Reverend's wife"), has been recorded in 1918 as "Removed at Girl's Own Request". Given the nature of the narrative describing the trauma of Garibooli's "removal" and its aftermath, we know this is untrue.

The damning tragedy and monstrous irony of Garibooli's sanctioned kidnapping is that her mother had been attempting to hide the girl to prevent her from being sexually abused by the white owner of the local rations store. The man's name? Tom Kerrigan - although not stated, doubtless he is a forebear to the historical society president, Cynthia.

But perhaps the most livid expression of Behrendt's contempt for abusive white citizens cloaked in fine reputation, power and authority is reserved for the upstanding married gentleman of Parkes, to whose household Garibooli/Elizabeth is "transported" by train (evoking thoughts of 18th-century convict ships) as a maid soon after. There she is secretly raped by him many times in the dark of night, becomes pregnant, is shipped out to Sydney where no one can spread malicious rumours about parentage, and immediately loses the newborn baby to the "nice" Mrs Carlyle from the Aborigines Protection Board, never to lay eyes upon the child again - thus continuing and worsening the destructive cycle and theme of broken family units, loss of identity, confusion and the spiral downwards into personal hell, internalised pain, amorality and criminality, visited in varying degrees upon members of the succeeding generations.

And who is Garibooli's patriarchal cankerworm but a Mr Howard. Surely this naming cannot be a coincidence! Behrendt, in fact, is on record, in an Age article by Claire Scobie, as saying that *Home* was inspired by the Howard Government's "callous indifference" to the 1997 *Bringing Them Home* report. It is a characteristic typical of fiction that it can travel a different path from that taken by traditional, narrative non-fiction history, where a visionary voice may view the great passage from the past to the present not as linear chronology but as a confluence. As Candice leaves the place where her grandmother was taken, it is "as if everyone who has been here throughout time now exists side by side". When, earlier in the novel, we have seen the young Garibooli, or "Whirlwind" in the old language, "running like the wind" over the ground, now, as Candice evokes the name, it is as though she, too, is flying through the shifting landscape, lightened of her emotional burden, towards both her past and her future.

FURTHER READING AND VIEWING

- *"Making a fiction of history"*, article by Jane Sullivan in *The Age*, A2 section, page 12, October 21, 2006
- *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (film directed by Phillip Noyce, 2002)
- *The Stolen Children: Their Stories*, edited by Carmel Bird, Random House, 1998

[Interview with Larissa Behrendt](#)

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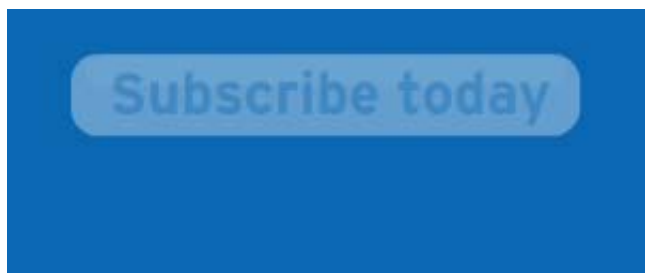
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